

Development of Subjectivity as an Aspect of Participation in social Practice

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Symposium: Subjectivity, Social Technologies and Professional Praxis

Part 2: Intersubjectivity, Inclusion and Implications for Professional Praxis

Paper:

Development of Subjectivity as an Aspect of Participation in social Practice

Introduction

In my abstract I took my point of reference in a critique of dualistic understandings of human development.

I stated that human development is often individualized and understood in contradictory ways. The child's development is conceived as either a question of adjusting to culture or as unfolding nature.

In this way we split up the societal structures that people live and develop through - and their acting and situated interplay in which human beings structure the possibilities of each other.

So, I will relate the question of development to the overall discussion for this symposium about how a situated and subject-orientated position may work with the aspects of social power, structure, and technology.

To me this brings up a focus to the interplay between participants in certain contexts – it brings up a discussion of what participants create together.

In psychology the development has often been understood as caused by different kinds of stimuli, 'mirrors' (representations), role models or scaffolds for an individual project of developing. In this way other persons appear like either 'instruments' or 'limitations' for a quite isolated individual process.

I will therefore discuss the meanings of 'others' to a person's development or you might say: how subjects develop *together* - participating in different kinds of social practice.

I will try to unfold this understanding through discussions about development and learning and through 2 examples or small empirical pictures to illustrate the theoretical points.

Dualisms in developmental understanding – theoretical problems

First I will - in short - sum up my problems with developmental concepts:

I find that our theoretical framework for development and learning is still complicated because of dualisms between development conceptualized as a kind of ‘natural displaying’ opposite a kind of structured ‘qualification’.

And especially this complicates our professional work concerned at supporting children in their developmental processes.

At least in Danish surroundings these discussions become stretched out between (universal) principles of not hindering the free displaying and (universal) principles about promoting development through setting up goals ‘from above’.

We see conflicts between different groups of professionals working in a compound practice where they have to coordinate their contributions.

It is conflicts related to pictures of the child as a ‘nature to unfold’ and pictures of the child as a container ‘absorbing’ the culture or the societal structures.

This leads into conceptual problems in relation to understanding the child as a living and acting subject as well as in relation to understanding the social context for the development. It establishes a sharp dichotomy between person and structure...

Even in theoretical developments struggling against individualism I think we find the tendencies to limit the social character of learning to a question of providing *input* for the process of learning viewed as acquisition of the cultural given.

Sometimes we seem to have overcome the dilemmas by making development a question of *internalization* of the social or other theoretical formulations about how something ‘social’ becomes ‘individual’.

But when we conceptualize social structures as unambiguous frames or scaffoldings isolated from the actions of the individuals we seem to return to a quite isolated individual in a quite abstract context which represents *the* overall societal structure.

By that we overlook that the life of children is organized as local, different as well as connected social practices where other people take part and make up resources and possibilities and not just restrictions or instruments for the individual learning and development.

Going beyond these dualisms implies to reflect the dialectical interplay between a child and its social conditions, and to work with social structures as *resources for acting* as well.

Furthermore social conditions appear as concrete relevant persons – playmates as well as parents and professionals. We have to take into account what these persons

create together and how they in their social interplay structure the possibilities of each other.

For the present discussion two points are of special relevance.

Firstly: What happens in the social situations is not to be taken for given – it is characterized by different perspectives, changes and disputes (in continuation of the concept of practice).

And secondly: The personal process of development should not be conceptualized as a question of *repeating* what others have done before (in continuation of the concept of subjectivity).

In the changing societal practises including their negotiations, dilemmas and cooperation, learning to take part is not well analyzed as assimilation of or assumption to static and unambiguous structures.

Participants are taking part in the negotiations, they are contributing to changes – and to the conflicts about in what directions things should be changed – and in their personal development they transgress and extend their possibilities of acting.

This also illustrates a shift from relating learning to systems of rules and representations to relating learning to problem solving, activities and dilemmas. Learning becomes related to taking part in complex social practice – and in such an understanding learners do not just acquire a practice – they do practice.

You might say that they act together with and in relation to social technologies...

These problems turn the analytical focus in direction of participation in social practice..

Participation in social practice

I will try to argue for a focus to the signification of '*others*' by a situation of the interplay between some children in a kindergarten. It is not to show how cute children are – and either that children should just lean on their own!

- as a matter of fact these girls were observed due to their many conflicts and marginalizing dynamics. Conflicts and cooperation are interwoven in this interplay.

What I want to emphasize is the intersubjectivity and the exploring aspects.

(the girls are 5-6 years old)

The girls are playing 'father, mother and children'. A younger girl is watching and one of the girls in the play asks: 'Could we have 2 babies?' The young girl becomes involved in the play as a baby. She does not really know how to play but while 'the mother' organizes the play by saying 'now the babies should sleep' she leans to her 'baby' whispering 'then you should close your eyes'.

Later one of the babies has made some trouble and is locked up in a wardrobe and 'the mother' is telling her how to behave. The girl playing an elder sister complains: 'I want to tell it as well'. The girls look at each other to find a solution and then 'the mother' sighs as a tired mother and says: 'Please, could you go and tell her?' (This observation is made by Maja Røn Larsen, cf. 2005)

Later the girl in the wardrobe becomes tired of sitting there and again the girls find a way of extending the play so that it offers a more interesting position to her. To continue the fun, the common creativity, and being part of this game, implies to create new possibilities for the participation of each other.

So the girls are continuously working with connecting new aspects, wishes and ideas. The cooperation and the *search* for common solutions to dilemmas, which can unite interests – and expand the common projects may illustrate the cooperative and exploring practice of development.

You could say that this interplay of the girls is just a simple reproduction of grown ups structures and power relations here – the father is not there, the elder sister has more power than the younger and the mother has the power of a housewife - a kind of power of powerlessness – she sighs tiredly...

But I will analyse the acting's of the children as an investigation of these structures which therefore may be seen as resources for the creativity as well. The girls do not simply repeat – even though of course they repeat as well – they 'arrange', explore and create social situations and possibilities.

And by that the interplay may illustrate how subjects develop *together* - and how they make up developmental possibilities of each other.

In the very process the single child develops personal experiences of participation and the communities change their social dynamics and projects.

So the picture is an argument for talking about Development of Subjectivity as an Aspect of Participation in social Practice.

Also it serve here as a back ground for presenting an example illustrating the significances of social technologies, and by that relating these questions more explicitly to professional practice and conflictual cooperation between the grown ups.

Social technologies of learning – an example from the school

As a point of departure the professionals working with children are working in and with a structure where responsibility is distributed into different places and parties – parents, pedagogues, teachers and psychologists have the responsibility for different parts of the learning and development of the children.

But especially when the technologies of ‘special help’ are at stake even more professionals become involved and with them a more complicated distribution of tasks, methods and procedures.

And the more ‘extra’ the children get the more they are also losing – to get the ‘extra’ means to leave something else and in relation to this I think we have overlooked the resources of learning located in the communities of children: You may remember the way the child from the example before involved the young one in the very process of learning: whispering ‘then you should close your eyes’...

In the school the structures for learning are very different from the kindergarten but still I observe the children creating their engagements in learning *together*. As I tried to illustrate with the first example.

The children I observed seem more than anything else directed towards each other. Already the first days in school children organize plays together - even though they do not know each other - they talk, ask questions, organize and have fun together.

In my interpretation the children have the significance of continuity to each other. They orientate in the new contexts together, they explore their life and its possibilities together and they develop personal preferences and subjective standpoints together.

The paradox is that we in school organize learning as an individualistic project where others are seen as a kind of competitors – competing about resources as well as achievements – or as disturbers, destroying the possibility of individual concentration.

Well, still you may observe lots of interplay, cooperation and common engagement in the classroom.

In a lesson of math the children in first grade get the task of creating figures with rubber bands and small plates with sticks on.

The children talk a lot about this task, help each other, show their results to each other and so on.

However, Martin does not have access to this possibility since an extra teacher enters to sit beside him and help him. It seems as though the 2 teachers have quite different approaches to the task as well as to helping Martin. The extra teacher tells that she and Martin will do it their way.

It is difficult to know exactly what happens in the dialogue between the extra teacher and Martin but again and again they disagree about the task. It looks like Martin finds that the extra teacher does not follow the rules and especially: That she does not believe in what he says. He looks as if he feels cheated and he argues, he gets angry and sad and he gives up – just sitting watching the other children.

The other children work concentrated and engaged with their figures and they shout loudly for more rubber band and show figures to each other.

Martin tries once again but again the cooperation between him and the extra teacher becomes deadlocked. This time Martin becomes quite miserable and desperate. It seems that the extra teacher gives up as well.

Martin sits on his own and the math teacher turns to Martin and tries to help him. As I have seen before she combines insisting, pressing, protesting and praising him – but maybe the important thing is that she believes his explanations about what happened – or that they follow the same method.

Anyhow Martin goes on, on his own, and soon shouts about his results and shows his product to the other boys.

What stroke me in this observation was the energy of the boy to try again and again and ‘coming up’ after several times of feeling lost and giving up everything. I am interested in the opposite of ‘giving up’ – all the small moments you as an observer may watch where participants succeed in something and in spite of conflicts and problems succeed in their interplay. That is why I tell you the last section as well – not to emphasize one teacher from another.

Between the professionals there is an ongoing exploration about how to understand and handle the problems the professionals have with Martin – but in relation to this example the teachers point to the situation as one more proof about how ‘impossible’ Martin is - ‘you saw it, he had a mental block’.

Conclusion

With this example I would like to point to 3 things:

1. The children have different access to the kind of resources that I tried to illustrate in the first example. They have different conditions in relation to become drawn into communities of learning and taking part in the engagements, structures of meanings and the experiences from taking part in such interplay.
2. There is an underlying disagreement about the methods, the procedures and rules – you could say that there is a disagreement about what the children are taking part in – the social praxis is ambiguous. And what the children are supposed to learn here is not just results, definitions and things like that – it is a way of taking part here – they are going to learn procedures in a social practice and how to arrange here.
3. In the school context the social technologies of learning seem to displace the social conflict to the personalities and individual competences of the children. Furthermore the social technologies of differentiating between those who are able to take part here and those who have ‘special needs’ for ‘special help’ – are connected to a *distribution of tasks among the professionals*. The technologies are part of this division of responsibility – and of power and guilt.

For the theoretical discussion I think it is important to state that the boy does not get caught by an unambiguous logic – a kind of abstract structure, a concept or a discourse. He gets caught in social conflicts about methods and understandings - or about ‘social technologies’ created in the very organization of these societal, professional and conflictual practices.

So, I think the social power, structures, and technologies are at stake here as concrete phenomena in subjective, situated and many-sided activity.

And I think we are in need for theoretical developments which can support and inspire the professionals daily exploration of concrete situations

- in stead of delivering closed definitions that deadlock the daily exploring aspects.

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